

## A Study of Subtitle Translation Strategies Used to Translate the Offensive Language in *Billions*

**Niko Hernando**

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,  
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA  
E-mail: a11180033@john.petra.ac.id

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the expressions considered as offensive language produced by all characters in their workplaces in *Billions* and the subtitle translation strategies used to translate them. The writer applied two theories: Battistella's (2005) theory of offensive language and Pedersen's (2011) theory of subtitle translation strategy. This study was done using a qualitative approach. The expressions produced fall into all four categories: Vulgarity, Epithets, Profanity, and Obscenity. In addition, four out of six subtitle translation strategies are used to translate the offensive language: Substitution, Omission, Generalization, and Direct Translation. Both Retention and Specification are not used. Some expressions that are linguistically considered offensive language may not carry the offense when applied in a certain context of the conversation. Substituting the offensive language with another local expression ensures the message is delivered and maintains the unpleasant impression whereas euphemizing or eliminating it may significantly alter the original nuance.

**Keywords:** subtitle translation strategy; offensive language; workplaces

### INTRODUCTION

As technology advances, more and more new forms of international communication emerge, leading to new forms of translation (Matkivska, 2014). Mass communication is no longer only through printed media but also through electronic media, developing a new translation process. One of the processes of translation in electronic media is often called subtitling. Usually, subtitling uses source text (ST) in the source language (SL) and translates it into the same form, target text (TT) in the target language (TL), which results in the form of written text called a subtitle.

Most American television series are starting to be aired globally through popular online streaming platforms, indicating that they are now intended for global audiences who may not understand the source language used in the series. Thus, a subtitle in the target language is needed. Among many television series, the writer chose *Billions* as the main subject of this study. Rotten Tomatoes (n.d.) claims that *Billions* holds an overall approval rating of 89%. According to Amazon (n.d.), most one-star reviewers on the website reveal their dissatisfaction toward the first season of *Billions* because it is just too full of language. Some refer to such terms as F word, F bomb, foul language, senseless offensive language, or vulgar language (Amazon, n.d.). Moreover, the practice of offensive language in the first season of *Billions* is more frequent than in other seasons.

Specifically, the writer was interested in observing offensive language in utterances produced by all characters in their workplaces in *Billions*. There are two main reasons that made the writer wanted to focus on offensive language. First, the act of swearing, which involves the use of offensive language, does occur in professional environments such as in workplaces as concluded by the study of Baruch et al. (2017). Moreover, their study also concludes that the

pattern of offensive language used by professionals while doing workplace swearing varies depending on the speaker's background and intention (Baruch et al., 2017). The writer found Baruch et al.'s (2017) findings very interesting because they are contrary to the social norms of incivility for professionals and the assumption that swearing does not occur in high-profile occupations. The second reason is the fact that the practice of offensive language occurs in electronic media. Battistella (2005) states that cursing, which involves the use of offensive language, in popular entertainment is not a new concern; it has surfaced in theater, radio, comedy, publishing, film, and television.

Furthermore, this study focused on the subtitle translation strategies used to translate the offensive language in *Billions*. In most cultures, offensive language occurs, but its tolerance varies depending on the kind of culture, society, beliefs, and other factors (Ávila Cabrera, 2016). For that reason, the writer found the subtitle translation of offensive language in electronic media a crucial linguistics issue to analyze since the transferring process involves three major parties: the series, the translator, and the target audiences. Not only does the translation process involve the language differences between the source language used in the series and the target languages used by the audiences, but also the cultural differences between the source culture embedded in the series and the target culture embedded by the target audiences.

Moreover, the writer also found that the subtitle translation of offensive language is another challenge for translators. Translators themselves may be unable to deliver the same understanding of offensive language in the source language (SL) to the target language (TL) since they need to be knowledgeable enough about both cultures (Prasetyo & Setyaningsih, 2016). When dealing with the subtitling of offensive language, the strategy in which texts are transferred may manipulate the source culture's value, resulting in off-target linguistic choices (Ávila-Cabrera, 2016).

The theories used as the theoretical framework in this study are the theory of offensive language by Battistella (2005) and the theory of subtitle translation strategy by Pedersen (2011). Battistella (2005) classifies offensive language into four main categories: Epithets, Profanity, Vulgarity, and Obscenity. Pedersen's (2011) strategy consists of six strategies: Retention, Specification, and Direct Translation, Generalization, Substitution, and Omission.

## **METHODS**

The writer used a qualitative approach in conducting this study. The data of this study was the English offensive language produced by all characters in their workplaces in *Billions* as well as the Indonesian subtitles. Here, the term 'offensive language' refers to the expressions in the form of words or phrases considered as offensive in one utterance. The writer directly watched the six episodes of the first season of *Billions* on Netflix, manually transcribed all English utterances containing offensive language as well as their Indonesian subtitles on each episode, and analyzed the collected data using Battistella's (2005) and Pedersen's (2011) theories.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section provides the discussion of the study's findings. This section is divided into two parts: (1) the expressions considered offensive language based on the context in *Billions* and (2) the subtitle translation strategies used to translate offensive language in *Billions*.

### The Expressions Considered Offensive Language Based on the Context in *Billions*

The categories of offensive language based on the expressions produced by all characters in their workplaces in *Billions* are: Epithets, Profanity, Vulgarity, and Obscenity.

- Epithets

Sample: Data 81/3/14:18

English Utterance: “You propose to trade a high-flying hedge fund manager for **a couple of old goombahs** throwing elbows over garbage pickups in Queens?”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Kau meminta tukar manajer dana investasi tingkat atas dengan **sepasang penjahat kecil** yang bertengkar karena truk sampah di Queens?*”

Originally, the expression ‘goombah’ is an endearment term for a “close friend” among Italian-Americans. It is an anglicized version of the Italian phrase *cumpà* or *compare*, which means “friend” or “godfather.” In addition, the fictional representation of Italian-American organized crime, the Mafia, also relates the expression ‘goombah’ to a stereotypical Italian-American male thug, gangster, or *mafioso*.

In this context, on a phone call with Rhoades, Amelia refers to the Schachetti Brothers as ‘a couple of old goombahs.’ Amelia used it as a patronizing way to refer to not only low-level criminals, given her position as an attorney, but also Italian-Americans. Amelia stereotypically directs the expression ‘goombah’ to Schachetti Brothers, who might be criminals but do not necessarily have a connection with the Mafia. Moreover, it is also considered an ethnic slur since Amelia here is a non-Italian.

- Profanity

Sample: Data 7/1/07:23

English Utterance: “**Jesus Christ.**”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Astaga.*”

Originally, the expression ‘Jesus Christ’ begins as prayerful invocations and sincere oaths, swearing an oath by God or in Jesus’ name. From a Christian view, it is considered sacred and might fall into blasphemy if used profanely. As stated in the Ten Commandments, it is a serious offense to take the name of the Lord in vain since it delivers sacredness, power beyond measure, and rebellion underneath. Today, the expression ‘Jesus Christ’ has become widely used as an exclamation to express surprise and discontent. Presumably, people blurt this out because the culture has defined that they are vulnerable, so they subconsciously rely on “a higher being.”

In this context, Kim is surprised by the 180-degree Axelrod’s personality change. The expression ‘Jesus Christ’ causes a serious offense since it is yelled at like an oath, especially for devout Christians. It might also offend any believers since it basically refers to God. However, the expression ‘Jesus Christ’ that is used here does not carry much offense to Danzig and Axelrod, the hearers. Presumably, the speaker and both hearers are all Christians, but may not be devout believers. As a result, both hearers might see the expression ‘Jesus Christ’ as a mere exclamation with no offense at all, although it has the God name in it.

- Vulgarity

Sample: Data 75/2/39:27

English Utterance: “You are gonna love **my nuts.**”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Kau pasti akan **menyukaiku.***”

Historically, the expression ‘nut’ has a figurative meaning based on its primary phrase *bust a nut*. The expression ‘nut’ is a shortened version of that phrase, and has a verb meaning to

ejaculate or to orgasm. It is then associated with man's testicles or sperm, often used in the plural as 'nuts.' Since the expression 'nuts' is closely related to male reproduction, it is often used to describe bravado, courage, and strength, which are considered part of manliness or masculinity.

In this context, McCue uses the expression to refer to the fruits of her investigation work, just as men have their testicles and sperm. She believes Rhoades would 'love her nuts,' aka her investigation work, just as most women love men's testicles and sperm. Moreover, she also goes with that expression to intensify the confidence of her investigation work, which reflects a man's courage. The expression 'nuts' that is used here causes offense for Rhoades since it is as if McCue implicitly assumes that Rhoades, a man, might also love men's testicles and sperm just as most women do.

- Obscenity

Sample: Data 78/3/09:09

English Utterance: “**Ass-to-mouth**, by the way.”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Pantat ke mulut, kepanjangannya.*”

The expression 'ass-to-mouth' or commonly abbreviated as A2M or ATM is a slang term primarily used to describe anal sex immediately followed by oral sex. It describes a sexual act in which a penis is removed from a receptive partner's anus and then directly put the same penis into that receptive partner's mouth. Some may think that it does not make sanitary sense, nor does it seem at all healthy and enjoyable. Doing anal sex itself is already considered taboo for some people because the primary function of the anus is for excretion, not for reproduction. However, some may also feel that ass-to-mouth has the dominance and submission, the sensation, and the thrill that comes with pleasing their partners.

In this context, the expression 'ass-to-mouth' itself describes a sexual act, which is ultimately considered offensive because most people believe it is very inappropriate to talk about sex in public. However, the expression 'ass-to-mouth' here does not carry much offense to Wendy, the hearer. Since they are right in the middle of a session where Wendy is the psychiatrist and Wags is the patient, it is perfectly normal for patients to express their concerns in as much detail as possible even though it involves a sexual act. As a psychiatrist herself, Wendy does not feel offended either. The patient's openness shows a feeling of acceptance and comfort during the session, which is every psychiatrist's main goal.

### **The Subtitle Translation Strategies Used to Translate Offensive Language in *Billions***

The subtitle translation strategies used to translate the offensive language in *Billions* are: Direct Translation, Generalization, Substitution, and Omission.

- Direct Translation

Sample: Data 41/2/12:07

English Utterance: “It's how I get in there and deal with **those animals.**”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Agar bisa masuk dan menghadapi **para hewan.***”

In this context, Saldana uses the expression 'animals' here to refer to other employees whom she believes have animal-like traits. Saldana believes the other employees are super greedy, ambitious, and sneaky in trading, just like animals. Moreover, Axelrod and his right hand, Wags, who lead the meeting, are also included in 'animals' because they judge every trader's performance just as predators attack their prey. Saldana often feels insecure and afraid if her performance is not as good as other employees or because Axelrod is unsatisfied.

**Hernando:** A Study of Subtitle Translation Strategies Used to Translate the Offensive Language in *Billions*

The translator used Direct Translation, specifically Calque, to translate ‘those animals’ into ‘para hewan.’ The translator used the intact literal translation of the original text, so the only difference here is the language. The translator tried to maintain the speaker’s intention to insult by not changing anything in the translated version. As a result, the emphasis on the speaker’s annoyance is delivered. However, the main message of this utterance may not be delivered accordingly. Some audiences, especially those who only rely on the Indonesian subtitle, may get confused since there is no future explanation about who these ‘animals’ are in the subtitle.

The translation result is not as offensive as the original version but euphemized. In English, the expression ‘animal’ is not used to refer to the animal physique. It is often used to insult someone by referring to animal traits in general. In Indonesian, there are actually two literal translations of ‘animal’: *hewan* dan *binatang*. Both *hewan* and *binatang* are used to describe animals in general, but when talking about animal traits specially to insult, *binatang* is way more offensive than *hewan*. The use of the expression *para hewan* is not off-target but does not manage to give the same impression of a strong offense. The translator could have better translated the expression ‘those animals’ into *para binatang* since it will appear more insulting and offensive.

- Generalization

Sample: Data 41/2/12:07

English Utterance: “You see an opportunity like that again, **you grab it like it's a horse cock and you're Catherine the Great.**”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Jika ada peluang begitu lagi, cepat manfaatkan saja peluangnya.*”

Catherine the Great ruled Russia for more than 30 years, making her the country's longest-serving female monarch. Many new cities, universities, and theaters were established, and a great number of European immigrants migrated to Russia, making Russia one of Europe's major powers. During and after her flamboyant and powerful reign, many urban legends about her arose, concerning her sexual behavior. One of the most famous is regarding her death, claiming she died as a result of her having sexual intercourse with a stallion when she actually died from a stroke. The origin of this false account is unknown, but it manages to gain popularity.

In this context, Wags advises Pouch to be more confident by referring him to Catherine The Great, who is a good example of a successful and ambitious opportunist. However, Wags also refers to the malicious gossip about her death in a very offensive way. Wags advises Pouch to take advantage of opportunities more confidently just as Catherine the Great confidently grabs a horse cock to have sexual intercourse with the horse even though she died. It is because Wags is simply mad at Pouch and decided to insult him a little bit.

The translator used Generalization, specifically Paraphrase, to translate ‘you grab it like it's a horse cock and you're Catherine the Great’ into ‘cepat manfaatkan saja peluangnya.’ The translator decided not to literally translate those offensive words of wisdom word by word but paraphrased them by going straight to the idea and reference behind them. The purpose of using this strategy may be to avoid ambiguity, resulting in the failure to deliver the main message. Some audiences may not be familiar with Catherine the Great nor the malicious gossip about her death with a horse. As a result, the main message and Wags’ emphasis are still delivered accordingly, the offensiveness in the translated version is omitted.

The translation result is not off-target, but it does not transfer the imaginative and funny nuance of the original text. Using another strategy, precisely Substitution, the translator could have better translated the word of wisdom into a more local analogy such as *seperti Greysia Polli dan Apriyani merebut medali emas* to describe the eagerness and confidence to grab the opportunity.

Translating an analogy with another local analogy will ensure the main message is delivered while also maintaining the nuances expressed in the original text.

- Substitution

Sample: Data 84/3/15:21

English Utterance: “**Son of a bitch.**”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Bajingan.*”

Apart from its literal meaning, the expression ‘son of a bitch’ is often used as an interjection to insult. It is used to express anger, annoyance, and contempt towards someone obnoxious or unpleasant. In Indonesian, there is no figurative meaning of ‘son of a bitch’ apart from its literal translation. However, when talking about an insult, there are several expressions in Indonesian that are equivalent to the expression ‘son of a bitch.’ One of them is the expression *bajingan*. Originally, the expression *bajingan* is for someone who is in charge of a cow on a *cikar* or oxcart. People used to complain about the long-awaited arrival of these *bajingan* since the *cikar* or oxcart is the only transportation option at the time. Due to the constant complaints, the expression *bajingan* has turned into an insult of what was originally the name of a profession.

In this context, Bryan blurts the offensive expression out right after McCue told him the information. The whole team are upset because at that time, they are right in the middle of investigating Axelrod. They plan to prosecute Axelrod for making illegal trades but still lack solid evidence. Unfortunately, it is the Eastern District that had one crucial puzzle piece that could lead them to Axelrod. What irritated them even more is that the Eastern District refused to horse trade the case, making them have to go the extra mile. In the midst of this unfavorable situation, Bryan also receives news that the defendant is willing to cooperate fully with the Eastern, implying that they would most likely lose the opportunity to get information from that person.

The translator used Substitution, specifically Cultural Substitution by TC, to translate ‘douche bags’ into ‘bajingan.’ The translator decided to culturally substitute the expression ‘douche bags’ with a local term that delivers the same meaning in the target culture, which is Indonesian culture. The translator goes with an Indonesian expression ‘bajingan,’ which also serves the same function as ‘douche bags,’ to refer to an obnoxious person. As a result, the main message, Bryan’s emphasis, and the offensiveness of this utterance are delivered accordingly.

- Omission

Sample: Data 73/2/26:40

English Utterance: “Until we know at least as much as **this fucking reporter** knows, let's keep the brights on Steven Birch.”

Indonesian subtitle: “*Hingga kita tahu setidaknya sebanyak wartawan ini, mari tetap perhatikan Steven Birch.*”

In English, the expression ‘fucking’ is derived from everyone’s favorite curse word, ‘fuck.’ Both expression ‘fuck’ and ‘fucking’ have a literal meaning to have sexual intercourse but is more widely used as an interjection. Both are considered the most versatile expressions since they can be used figuratively to express strong emotions such as anger, frustration, and even joy. Usually, the expression ‘fucking’ is used as an adjective to intensify, especially an angry one. In Indonesian, both expressions ‘fuck’ and ‘fucking’ only have the literal meaning to have sexual intercourse. Both expressions cannot be used as an interjection.

In this context, Rhoades and his team are still bothered and find it hard to believe that reporters could decipher Birch’s case before the authorities. Rhoades is annoyed at this reporter from *The*

**Hernando:** A Study of Subtitle Translation Strategies Used to Translate the Offensive Language in *Billions*

*Financial Journal* because he knows this reporter was bribed with the Birch case. The briber wanted Rhoades to be the last to know about the Birch case. Moreover, Rhoades believes that Birch's sudden illegal trading revelation had something to do with him publicizing that he would investigate Axelrod. As a result, the Birch case had forced him to postpone Axelrod's investigation.

Here the translator used Omission to translate 'this fucking reporter' by omitting the word 'fucking' into 'wartawan ini.' The translator decided to omit the expression 'fucking' since the literal meaning is not related to the context of the conversation. As a result, it can be concluded that the main message is still delivered accordingly. However, the translation result is not as offensive as the original version. Since the translator decided to omit the expression 'fucking,' the offensiveness and Rhoades' emphasis on his annoyance in the translated version is also omitted. The translator could have better added the expression *sialan* into *wartawan sialan* since it will appear more insulting and offensive. The expression *sialan* is often used to curse someone despicable or obnoxious. It will also transfer the annoyance the speaker tries to show using the original expression.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the writer can conclude that the practice of offensive language does occur in workplaces as portrayed in a business-setting television series, *Billions*. Moreover, the pattern of offensive language used in *Billions* also varies covering all four categories of offensive language. These findings are in line with Baruch et al.'s (2017) findings which prove that the practice of offensive language occurs both in real-life professional environments and in motion pictures.

However, the writer is of the opinion that some expressions considered to be offensive language may not carry the offense when applied in a certain context of the conversation in *Billions*. Mostly, these expressions fall into Profanity and Obscenity categories. Linguistically speaking, the expressions still have the characteristics to be considered to be offensive language according to the theory. However, the hearer may not be offended depending on the context of the conversation where the expression is applied.

In addition, the writer also finds out that Substitution is the most dominant strategy when it comes to translating offensive language in *Billions*. The writer is of the opinion that the translator tends more to substitute the offensive language with another equivalent expression or at least a contextually suitable expression in the target language in order to fill the gaps. The findings reveal that Substitution is the most applied to translate Epithets and Vulgarity. Substituting the original offensive language with another local expression that is considered to be in the same category ensures the main message is delivered while also maintaining the unpleasant impression in the translation result.

However, the translator also might choose not, or be unable, to substitute but omit some expressions because of cultural constraints such as conservativeness, unfamiliarity, or simply being too pejorative. Consequently, there might be a significant betrayal of the original expression as well as the distortion of the character's depiction. Some results do not reflect the original intention or the characters' personalities, especially in the absence of the offense. The findings reveal that Omission is mostly applied to translate Profanity and the second most applied to translate Epithets and Vulgarity. Euphemizing or even eliminating the offensive language might significantly alter the original nuance and impression, resulting in a plain expression. Nevertheless, Omission might help the translator to save space on the screen

After all, the writer's current study is limited to a small scale, involving one television series and one setting. Hence, future researchers might want to broaden the research by involving more than one television series or even using other media-based data with different settings. In addition, future research might want to compare the similarities and differences of translating the offensive language in two or more different media, which might come up with new perspectives in the field of translation. Despite its limitations, the writer sincerely hopes that the findings of this study come helpful to translation studies, especially from English to Indonesian, when it comes to translating offensive language.

## REFERENCES

- Amazon. (n.d.). *Amazon.com: Customer reviews: Billions season 1*. Amazon. Retrieved from [https://www.amazon.com/productreviews/B019ZUZ3RU/ref=atv\\_dp\\_cr\\_see\\_all?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews](https://www.amazon.com/productreviews/B019ZUZ3RU/ref=atv_dp_cr_see_all?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews)
- Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2016). The treatment of offensive and taboo terms in the subtitling of reservoir dogs into Spanish. *TRANS. Revista de Traductología*, 20, 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.24310/trans.2016.v0i20.3145>
- Baruch, Y., Prouska, R., Ollier-Malaterre, A., & Bunk, J. (2017). Swearing at work: The mixed outcomes of profanity. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 32(2), 149–162. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jmp-04-2016-0102>
- Battistella, E. L. (2005). *Bad language: Are some words better than others?* Oxford University Press.
- Matkivska, N. (2014). Audiovisual translation: Conception, types, characters' speech and translation strategies applied. *Studies About Languages*, 0(25), 38–44. <https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.sal.0.25.8516>
- Pedersen, J. (2011). *Subtitling norms for television: An exploration focussing on extralinguistic cultural references*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Prasetyo, R. B., & Setyaningsih, R. W. (2016). Negotiated taboo in Sylvia Day's bared to you erotic novel. *Anglicist*, 5(2), 134–144. <http://journal.unair.ac.id/ANGLICIST@negotiated-taboo-in-sylvia-day%E2%80%99s-bared-to-you-erotic-novel--article-11338-media-94-category-8.html>
- Rotten Tomatoes. (n.d.). *Billions*. Rotten Tomatoes. <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/billions>